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‘Coffeeland’ Review: One Crop’s Stimulating Effects

How a young man from the Manchester slums transformed El Salvador into a coffee-exporting powerhouse.

Coffeeland

By Augustine Sedgewick

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By Stuart Ferguson

One thing that might be remembered about Gen. Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, the dictator of El Salvador in the 1930s and early 1940s, is that he had colored lights—some say blue, others green—strung up in the capital of San Salvador to ward off a smallpox epidemic. Did his eccentric strategy have any effect? Nobody is sure, though we can be doubtful. The novelist Gabriel García Márquez, in his 1982 Nobel acceptance speech, improved on the story by color-coordinating the display, saying that Hernández Martínez had draped the city’s streetlamps “in red paper to defeat an epidemic of scarlet fever.” García Márquez also noted—to make a political point and not a picturesque one—that in 1932 Hernández Martínez had 30,000 Salvadoran peasants killed “in a savage massacre.”

Historians argue over the number, but the catalyst for the blood-letting is clear: a rebellion that followed the collapse of the coffee market during the Depression. At the time, the American secretary of state, Henry Stimson, called the failed uprising “a nasty proletarian revolution.” In some quarters it is known simply as “La Matanza”—the massacre. The event is the linchpin of Augustine Sedgewick’s “Coffeeland,” a wide-ranging chronicle of the role of coffee in American culture and commerce and, above all, in the fascinating history of El Salvador, a small country along Central America’s Pacific Coast that is rich in coffee beans but not in traditions of political stability or broad-based property rights.

Mr. Sedgewick, a history professor at CUNY, sets so many themes and story lines in motion that his narrative might have easily become overwhelming were it not for his deft handling of them. There is no mistaking where he stands—the main story he tells is one of oppression and predation—but one needn’t subscribe to all his righteous judgments to value the rich tapestry he has woven.

Even as the U.S. was growing to become the world’s largest coffee market by 1900, in El Salvador the bean was king—constituting 80% of the country’s exports by 1921. Governments rose or fell because of price fluctuations or new taxes on the commodity. The well-meaning man whom Hernández Martínez overthrew (the general was his vice president) was a planter who could no longer pay the military when crop prices plummeted. As the Depression set in, coffee prices fell by more than 60% on the world market. Brazil destroyed 10 billion pounds of it trying to stabilize the price; it didn’t work. In the coffee-growing regions of El Salvador, unemployment grew to more than 40%; workers who still had jobs made less than half of what

they had been paid a few years before. Add an increasingly militant communist movement to such disruption and discontent and you get an insurrection. The coffee-growing regions of the country were at the heart of the revolt, and they fared the worst in Hernández Martínez's bloody suppression. In the United States meanwhile, as Mr. Sedgewick tells us, lower consumer prices for Central American coffee fueled the rise of the supermarket—and the introduction of the coffee break at work.

How could a non-alcoholic drink brew disaster for one place and abundance in another? To find out, Mr. Sedgewick considers the origins, life cycle and harvesting of coffee beans; the history and habits of coffee drinking; the science of caffeine and the marketing of the beverage that delivers it—not to mention Marxism, American imperialism, Brazilian slavery and the replacement of the stovetop percolator with drip pots. Goethe has a place in the narrative (once an “avid coffee drinker,” he gave a box of beans to a physician-friend to investigate their bodily effects); so do Starbucks and Folger's.

But the figure at the center of “Coffeeland” is planter James Hill (1871-1951), a rags-to-riches archetype and the source of the book's portentous subtitle: “one man's dark empire and the making of our favorite drug.” While eventually known as the “king of coffee” in El Salvador—and the founder of one of the “fourteen families” that ran the country as an oligarchy for much of the 20th century—Hill was hardly to the plantation born. An Englishman from Manchester's slums, he had an eye for bigger things early in life, Mr. Sedgewick tells us, and took Spanish lessons while clerking in a London fabric shop. At the age of 18, he left for El Salvador to seek his fortune. By then (roughly 1890) the country had been producing coffee commercially for 50 years.

The road to El Salvador's commercial vitality—and James Hill's—is a winding one. Three centuries ago, according to Mr. Sedgewick, coffee was cultivated for export in one place: Yemen. Traders spread the taste for it from the port of Mocha through the Ottoman lands; by the end of the 17th century European empires were competing for the commodity, and the Dutch had established plantations on the island of Java, wresting control of the trade. In the 18th century, the Dutch brought coffee to Surinam; the Portuguese to Brazil; the French to Saint-Domingue (Haiti); the Spanish to Cuba; and the English to Jamaica.

But cultivation of the coffee crop is heavily labor intensive, and the 1791 slave rebellion in Haiti put paid to remunerative harvests there. By 1865 slavery had been abolished everywhere in the Western Hemisphere except for Cuba (where it ended in 1886) and Brazil (1888). Hence James Hill arrived in El Salvador just as the Brazilian crop—until that point, the source of half the world's coffee—was imploding for lack of forced labor. Suddenly there was room in the market for the milder-tasting Central American harvest. At almost the same time a coffee blight in Asia all but ruined the crops in Java and Ceylon.

Upon his arrival in Santa Ana—the country's second city—Hill set up a tailoring business, but he gave it up when his shop burned down in mysterious circumstances (a large insurance payment was rumored). He then restarted his fortune the old-fashioned way: He married it. María Dolores Bernal, 22 years old, brought several coffee plantations as her dowry, and her new husband, then 23, threw himself into the trade. An agent for an American importer wrote back to San Francisco his suspicions that Hill dyed his beans—back then, beans were graded and paid for based on their look and color. But the same agent also described Hill as “one of the hardest workers and most energetic men” in Santa Ana. Hill, who owned 11 plantations by 1919,

continuously added acreage to his holdings. They were all serviced by his mill and headquarters, Las Tres Puertas, named for the hexagon symbol—every other side swung in to meet in the middle, as if on hinges—that was stamped on Hill’s coffee bags. Mr. Sedgewick notes that this “triskelion” was a variation of the one stamped on the coins of Alexander the Great—Hill’s hero.

Besides his convenient marriage and the even more convenient drop in the supply of coffee coming from Brazil and Asia, there was one more factor in Hill’s favor. The liberal governments of El Salvador—liberal in the 19th-century, secular, pro-business sense of the word—had been steadily increasing the acreage available for coffee growing. They did so, as Mr. Sedgewick is at pains to emphasize, by confiscating communal lands held by “Indian and peasant” farmers who raised food crops. Starting in 1882, if local people couldn’t produce a valid (and rare) land title, their property was “liberated” (confiscated) and auctioned to those with more up-to-date plans for it. At the end of the process, more than a quarter of El Salvador was converted from communal property to private. This shift helped coffee production to triple between 1880 and 1890. Starting in 1910, Hill introduced a new, hardier seedling called Bourbon, which allowed the crop to be grown at higher and lower elevations than before, adding still more pressure to acquire land for cultivation.

“The conquest of territory by the coffee industry [in El Salvador] is alarming,” wrote a local newspaperman in the 1920s. “It has occupied all the high ground and is now descending to the valleys, displacing maize, rice, and beans. It goes in the manner of the conquistador, spreading hunger and misery.” Mr. Sedgewick agrees with this assessment and says that hunger was the appalling cost that Hill and other planters imposed on El Salvador to make their fortunes. At the same time, their success allowed coffee to be sold inexpensively in the U.S., drawing shoppers into ever expanding food markets where they could routinely find their favorite brand. The new supermarkets, Mr. Sedgewick notes, were up to 40 times the size of the old neighborhood groceries and employed far fewer people per square foot. Thus while the expanding groves called for more workers in El Salvador, the sale of their fruit in North America needed fewer.

Hill employed 500 people on his land, but at harvest time he needed 10 times that number to be sure that the delicate art of harvesting was carried out quickly, while the crop was ripe. To gather so many people, Hill believed “his” *mozos*, or indigenous workers, needed the lure of guaranteed meals. On his coffee plantations, there were no fruit trees, no vegetable patches, no chickens or any other animals allowed. The only places to get food were Hill’s closely regulated kitchens, which provided a lunch and dinner of two tortillas each and all the beans that could be piled on them. And there was coffee to drink.

As for the wages on plantations, Mr. Sedgewick says that they were usually some form of company scrip only good at the boss’s store. He indicts Hill and thinks it was a deliberate policy, the planter “feeding his trees and starving his workers, producing coffee and hunger in corresponding amounts.” But Hill was not Conrad’s Kurtz. As journalist Arthur Ruhl suggested in “The Central Americans” (1928): The Industrial Revolution just came to Central America a century too late.

In 1927, Hill told the visiting Ruhl that his laborers “could do twice as much as they do . . . but they’re born lazy, and once they’ve got enough to eat, don’t care.” He went on to complain that he was having “a hard time nowadays getting men to work barefooted on the drying floors. . . . Bolshevism? It’s drifting in. . . . There’ll be trouble one of these days.” There was, but Hill and his fellow planters survived La Matanza, protected by the government from proletarian takeover.

Though the Salvadoran military would continue to govern for roughly five decades, the coffee oligarchs usually held ultimate power. As for James Hill, he died peacefully on vacation in Pebble Beach, Calif.

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